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ABSTRACT

Analysis has become especially challenging as researchers become more aware of their positions as subjective participants as well as analysts of their own research projects. Four female researchers involved in a study of gender and literacy analyzed their own disclosures from the recent past, and found the concepts of subjectivity, transaction, objectivity, and reflexivity to be key issues in their struggles to be honest with the data and with themselves. The researchers' desires to understand has directed each of them to the literature on research methodology, yet they continue in their struggles to apply theories of subjectivity that focus on the stories of others to their situation of analyzing their own personal texts. The researchers need to allow themselves a critical space in which to question the researchers they are in relation to the participants they once were (and perhaps still are). As they acknowledge this ambiguity and this space, they may be able to identify with themselves without losing the subjectivity they desire and claim. Still, they question whether a researcher committed to feminist methodology can balance the dual roles of researcher critically analyzing her own disclosures as a study participant. While it is important for them to view their analysis as involving a subject/subject focus, it is also necessary to understand the self/other relationship inherent in the researchers' work as both readers and writers. Even after their divergent and passionate discussions and stances about their own responsibilities and obligations in this project, the researchers are still left questioning whether they have fulfilled their moral obligation and ethical responsibility as to how they position themselves. (Contains 17 references.) (RS)

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The Subject/Object Dilemma in Gender and Literacy Research: Self Disclosure and Its Analysis

A Paper Presented at
The 1997 National Reading Conference

by

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The Subject/Object Dilemma in Gender and Literacy Research: Self Disclosure and Its Analysis

Analysis has never been easy, and it has become especially challenging as researchers become more aware of their positions as subjective participants *as well as* analysts of their own research projects. For the four of us involved in a study of gender and literacy, whereby we analysized our own disclosures from the recent past, we found the concepts of subjectivity, transaction, objectivity, and reflexivity key issues in our struggles to be honest not only with the data, but perhaps more importantly, with ourselves. As researchers intent upon analysis that portrays not only an accurate portrait of participants with whom we collaborate, but also an honest portrayal of who we are as the researchers, we struggled especially with our self-disclosures as researchers who are also the research "subjects" within our work on gender and literacy. The nature of such analysis, and with it, the transacting with our own "texts" or disclosures, and the interplay betwen subject and object within our readings and writings have left us with questions. Questions of what roles we play as researchers who desire to see not only what we have written, but what perhaps might be perceived through another's eyes, or from a distance across time and purpose.

At the beginning of this research project, we were writers. Later, through analysis and categorization, we became readers. How does that change us as participants within our own research? How do we adjust our own lenses to see ourselves as we were, and then readjust them to see who we are in relation? How do we attempt to analyze our writings if (and when) we are still attached to that person we once were? These are just some of the questions we have wrestled with as we attempt to portray ourselves as both insiders and outsiders of our writings.

What follows is part of our wrestling with those interconnections of participant-self to self-as-researcher.

The Subject-Subject Connection

How do I as both researcher/subject analyze my own "text" or disclosures? Do these conflicting roles impede true analysis or do they encourage a more authentic analysis? Does the acknowledgment of one's frame or position encourage objectivity? Does the space created through time between writing and analyzing self-disclosures encourage objectivity between the researcher-I and the subject-I?

Each one of us asked ourselves questions very similar to these as we began to read about ourselves through the writings we completed eighteen months earlier. Could we really look at our own writings from enough, or any, distance necessary for an honest and accurate portrayal of who we were so many months earlier? Could we continously position and reposition (Jipson, Munro, Victor, Jones, and Freed-Rowland, 1995) ourselves as reader -- writer? Was a "distance" within such a transaction necessary? Monica in particular found herself disconcerted by her own connections to the writing she had produced earlier. She writes:

> As I began to analyze my own think pieces on my definitions of self/identity, looking for overarching themes and categories, I found that I could not separate myself as reader from myself as writer. As I read my pieces, I felt in some ways like an insider, knowing the whole scope instead of just what I as the writer presented, visualizing the actual experiences described, and in some ways reliving the moments illustrated. Perhaps the personal nature of the topic influenced my subjective perspective since I was writing about how I defined myself at the time. On the other hand, as a researcher/subject, I recognized that the point of view illustrated in the text captured a moment of my life, an analysis of who I was to myself then not now. Knowing how I have changed also influenced my process of analysis. I found myself thinking "Oh, I focused on this aspect of my life because those were the questions I had back then. So much has changed ...Are these really the themes of my identity?"

Discussing the themes that emerged throughout all of the pieces of our analysis including our own with the other collaborating researchers helped each of us to recognize that our agreement over categories and their examples illustrated that we are all able to remove ourselves to some degree. We did come up with similar categories when analyzing our own pieces. Yet, questions still emerged. One question had to do with our intimate knowledge of each other as colleagues and friends. Were we able to find similar categories because we had developed an interpretive community (Fish, 1980) from which we found similar categories or was our construction of specific categories because we were analyzing the texts more individually and perhaps more distantly and "objectively"?

Eventually we began to wonder if even our discussions allowed us to "read" more into the data, and thus categorization. Did our discussions of emerging themes in our own written pieces encourage elaborations on our self-perspectives that really did not exist except through our own interpretive lense from which we exerted influence over its categorization? Did our extended "storytelling" and "explanations" influence our understandings of one another's self-disclosures? Did our own subjectivity impede analysis?

Monica explains further her dilemma as a researcher who found it more difficult to separate from the subject-subject nature in which she felt she was involved.

> As each of us began to write our findings from the data, some of us found ourselves using the royal "we" to illustrate our analysis. Although we were only a small part of the twenty six authors of the pieces we analyzed, some of us saw ourselves as perhaps not only part of the group, but the part that could speak of a unified experience that we believed all the members of our research team would support. However, our unified experience and voice was quickly questioned and challenged by our colleagues. It was only after reading the analysis of other groups that we realized that maybe we should define ourselves as

> separate from the group, identifying ourselves as both researchers and subjects and providing an explanation of our analytical perspectives. These questions are ever-present in my mind as I continue to negotiate and understand my position as researcher/subject.

Our desires to understand has directed each of us to the literature on research methodology, yet we continue in our struggles to apply theories of subjectivity that focus on the stories of others to our situation of analyzing our own personal texts.

Becoming Research Object while Remaining Subject

This struggle led us to new questions, and even suspicion about the complete subject-subject connection. Yet, we also challenged the "objectivity" of any research. This disquiet, this concern about our roles as researchers who could attempt to separate from our roles as the original writers of the texts we were analyzing led us to the following new questions. What happens to a researcher who is asked to analyze her own self-disclosures? How does she maintain the position of researcher while conducting analysis on the artifacts she created as the "researched" -- the research object? And how can she do this without undermining that analysis through the inconsideration or disconsciousness of alternative readings? Can we be too close to the material we are analyzing, and if so, how do we extend beyond this intrasubjectivity that may close off the dialogue such research requires? How does a researcher committed to feminist methodology balance the dual roles of researcher critically analyzing her own disclosures as a study participant? And what about the dilemma of holding onto subjectivity while also accomodating an analytical stance, which brings about the awareness that she may need to redefine herself as research object, that someone "other" than herself?

These questions were, and continue to be, something we must wrestle with as feminist researchers who are committed to the dialogic and dialectic relationship of researcher and researched. However, the intersubjectivity of feminist research, whereby all participants within the research may begin to create, or see, new views of themselves through "an other subject" (Bakhtin, as cited in Bauer & McKinstry, 1991), is difficult with self disclosures, unless each of us finds a way to identify, in some way, against herself, so as "look again" at our individual thinking and writing. We need to be able to create (or if we embrace Bakhtin's concept of always being in dialogue, become aware of it within ourselves) a dialectic, a "double consciousness" (Mies, 1991) which would allow each of us the ability of "being able to observe [myself] from outside [myself]" (p.79). Yet, this double consciousness is not "some imaginary reality, but rather the real, living other woman who is looking at me, trying to understand me, posing unusual questions" (p. 79) in the research relationship of feminist research. And, in this study, these real, living women outside of ourselves, were actually each one of us trying to distance herself from her own intrasubjectivity. And each of us had to attempt to be able to identify against herself while actually looking at her self. We had to somehow begin to separate -- begin to recognize the "other" within ourselves -- if we were to suggest that we could analyze our own writings from a distance that allowed us to see ourselves honestly, without pretext or pretension. Creating this double consciousness may allow us to ask the questions of ourselves that we would desire to ask any other research subject/participant. And unlike other research relationships, where we may be able to claim, at most, partial identification, the research that concerns self-disclosure and its analysis must fight *for* only partial identification and against total identification that may cloud, or misinterpret what we actually wrote for what we later wished we had written.

Thus, in essence we become both the object-other and subject-self of the research we are conducting, which examines the connection between gender and literacy. Yet, we must be consistently vigilant against a divided consciousness that may have each of us identifying so much against ourselves as the writers of these texts we analyzed that we cannot claim or recognize ourselves as the writers we once were. Rather, the intrasubjectivity we create must accomodate our identifying *with* our "selves" while also seeing that we are both researcher *and* the research object -- two different women across time and purpose. Our particular research necessitates a double consciousness that extends beyond Mies' (1991) concept to create a, or give voice to the, dialogue within the self, while also dialoguing with others beyond the "other" -- the past writer -- within ourselves.

We needed to become aware of our duality of positions through what Tetrault (1993) calls positionality. This may allow us to proceed beyond, or perhaps within, this ambiguity of "subject--objectness" we may have decided was a dilemma in our research analysis. Tetrault explains that:

> Positionality means that important aspects of our identity, for example, our gender, our race, our age...are markers of *relational positions* rather than essential qualities. Their effects and implications *change according to context*. (All italics are ours.)

Positionality allows us to identify who we are as researchers, while also allowing us to be the individual women and writers --research participants and objects of analysis -- who wrote the pieces we now, as more distant researchers, analyze. We are both women, the researcher and researched, and we must identify ourselves from both those locations. And we need to allow ourselves a critical space in which to question the researchers we are in relation to the participants we once were (and perhaps still are). As we acknowledge this ambiguity and this

space, we may be able to identify with, and as, ourselves without losing the subjectivity we desire and claim as a feminist researchers, while also maintaining a distance that keeps us from co-opting the selves we were.

The Reading / Writing / Research Relationship

The relationship between the reading and writing of texts (in this case our "think pieces" written months before their formal analysis) produced by the same women who later analyzed them is both enlightening and complex. It is this relationship between author and interpreter (reader) that brings into question the notion of duality upon which the subject / object dichotomy is predicated. When the writer and reader are either the same person or part of the same community that is reading and writing for (and with) each other, knowledge is forged through connected knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986), caring and mutuality (Noddings, 1984), and reflection (Helle, 1991).

The reading and writing of our own, as well as others', texts creates a bond wherein the relationship is no longer subject / object, but rather one that connects subject with subject. "The voice of connected knowing carries with it an intimacy that presumes sharing of self and other, a felt relations between knower and known" (Helle, 1991, p. 54). This voice is recognized by references to self, language that puts forth feeling, the acknowledgement of continuous change, and the exposure of internal dialogue. As Belenky (1986) suggests, these forms of reading and writing move "outside the frame authorities provide and create their own frames" (p. 133). For example, one of the participants in this study clearly demonstrates a kind of sharing that asks the reader to become involved in the construction of knowledge when she writes:

The very language we use and where and when we use it creates who we are

> at any given moment and the study of the relationship between gender and literacy I think might do much better to help us sort out which are the differences we can use to create a better world and which are superimposed differences that still haunt us and create images of meek women and macho men.

The caring and mutuality as Noddings (1984) discusses are built on "receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness" (p.61). As Helle (1991) suggests it is "...an 'I' [that] renders itself both subject and object and represents a concrete world of past and future predicated upon this relation. The various textual strategies writers employ 'fit' the selves we may become in and through the process of reading. By making sense of the text, we participate in the intersubjective dialogue" (p. 50). We care because we become part of the construction of knowledge through mutual understanding and a willingness to enter into egalitarian relationships. As Holly illustrates in her writing about "teaching and learning", caring and mutuality lead to a continuous building of knowledge.

> My students and I are dependent upon on another, neither one or the other intrinsically stronger. But if I hazard a guess, I would say that at this time in my life, my students can teach me more of what I want to kow than I could teach them. I look at them and feel they hold many of the answers I am seeking about students, teachers, and community. My students, my thinking, their thinking, and our combined voices is the path I choose to take in the classroom.

The notion of reflection as a means of constructing knowledge is suggested by Grumet (1991) when she says, "Multiple texts and multiple interpreters bring the presentation of personal knowledge out of the whispered confidences of the analytic dyad, complicit couple, sadomasochistic duo, and into a community of people who share a world" (p. 76). This idea of multiplicity and the relfection it encourages the members of a shared world to engage, helps to heal the split between subject and object. It deepens the level of mutual concern and interest in constructing knowledge from our words, and encourages us to develop language that relates

experience in ways that promote growth and change. We "...quest for a procedural language as a series of epistemological shifts from received knowledge through subjective knowing and finally, toward a more fluid and open-ended multiplicity" (Helle, 1991, p. 58). The key for analysis and research is that procedures and procedural languages come out of these relational contexts. Holly expresses some of this when she wrote her thinking about "ways of knowing" as a research participant.

> Exploring sounds so masculine in the historical sense, but I need to remember Sacajewa lead Lewis and Clark. I also need to remember that men have established the trail and thus, in their arrogance, may feel another "way of knowing", and alternative route to and through knowledge is not needed. So, the fact that I am female, and not convinced we have adequately explored or investigated the domains of knowledge, affects my entire outlook on teaching, learning, curriculum, and "ways of knowing." Current accepted practices and philosophies find even themselves scrutinized in my classroom.

The reading and writing of our own texts as research tools in constructing knowledge about gender and literacy rests on the processes of connected knowing, caring and mutuality, and reflection. For if self knowledge is an activity rather than an entity as (Hanson, 1986) proposes, them our development of shared knowledge is also a process that is subject to change as we continue to study "the apparent contradictions between subjectivity and objectivity" (Witherell, 1991, p.86). As we analyzed our writings, we had to keep in mind all these factors so that we could remember, and be cognizant of, our connectedness as well as retaining our ability to negotiate meaning beyond our own individual interpretations. While it is important to view our analysis as involving a subject / subject focus, it is also necessary to understand the self / other relationship inherent in our work as both readers and writers. It is through this relationship that we participate in an active dialogue whereby we can continue to construct knowledge and reflect

upon its significance.

Self Reflexivity in Our Research

Reflecting upon the significance of our knowledge, and its construction, involves the awareness of reflexivity. Self-reflexivity, an element needed and desired in our research, means that after being startled by the intentional nature of our thought, we recover and reflect upon our surprise (Grumet, 1990). It means that we had to turn around and look at ourselves as researchers and as subjects of this research project. We needed to reflect upon the research process and deal with the difficult issues of positioning ourselves in this work, as well as our process of engagement with the data, the issues of validity and accuracy, and reporting our dual roles of researchers and participants.

In reflecting upon our positionality, we are involved with the interrogation of ourselves about our own locations (Alcoff, 1989, in Lather, 1991). We needed to recognize that we are both the knower and the known; we are simultaneously the researcher and the researched, which are positions that are always off balance and in need of dialogue. Being situated in these positions, we cannot be absent or neutral.

Knowing that we are present at all times in this research, we must reflect upon our locations as subjects and social scientists in the research process. Through this reflection, we become more aware of our own ignorance of the epistemological issues surrounding the choice of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the means of analysis. At the time we chose to use grounded theory as our analytic tool, some of us were unaware of the interpretive paradigms (constructivist, feminist, ethnic, Marxist, and cultural studies) within qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Some of us didn't recognize the contradictions of trying to engage in a

feminist project while using postposivist analysis. (Some of us would argue that both may be accomplished depending upon the research. We still have many questions that remain unanswered.)

When we think about validity and the research we have embarked upon, we think of Patti Lather (1986) and her suggestion that the approach to validity in critical inquiry is premised on systematized self-reflexivity, and its commitment to interrogating what is or is not done on a practical level. It is a validity in which legitimation depends upon the researcher's ability to explore the resources of different inquiry problematics, which leads to a validity premised on discourse (Lenzo, 1995). Yet, as Lenzo notes, "there are serious limits to our abilities to self-critique", when such discourse is expected from the same person is both researcher and research participant.

Limited in our ability to self-critique, we also struggle to freeze experiences and interactions with other people into words, sentences, paragraphs, and rhetorically appropriate essays, itself an issue germane to discussions of the conduct of qualitative inquiry (Lenzo, 1995). In this particular research project, it has been especially difficult to know how to represent ourselves as researchers, subjects, and collaborators. Self-reflexive practice suggests there is a moral obligation and ethical responsibility (Lenzo, 1995) to how we position ourselves, conduct research, assess research, and write research reports. Even after our divergent, and passionate discussions and stances about our own responsibilities and obligations in this project, we are still left questioning whether that responsibility and obligation has been fulfilled.

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